

In memory of four little girls

The Day The Children Died

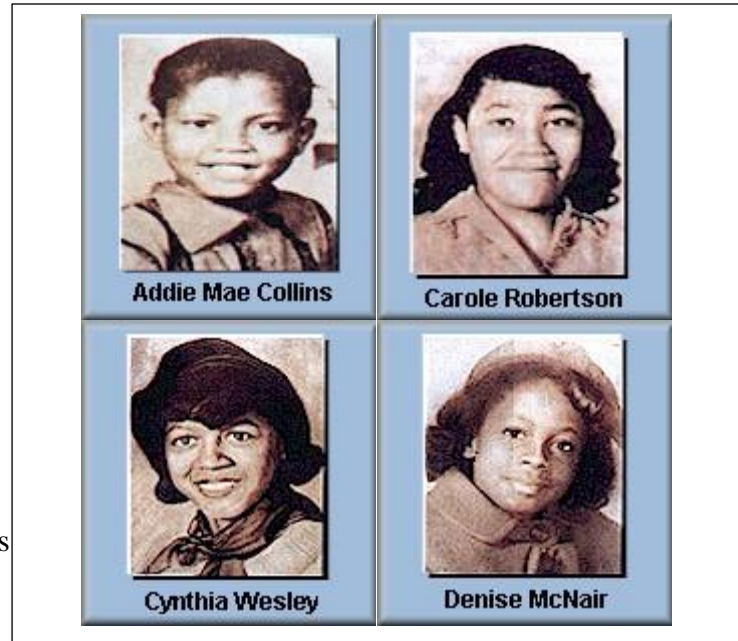
Kyle Smith

Gail Cameron Wescott in Birmingham and

David Cobb Craig in New York City

Photographs by Ann States/SABA

SUNDAY SCHOOL HAD JUST LET OUT, and Sarah Collins Cox, then 12, was in the basement with her sister Addie Mae, 14, and Denise McNair, 11, a friend, getting ready to attend a youth service. "I remember Denise asking Addie to tie her belt," Cox, now 46, says in a near whisper, recalling the morning of Sept. 15, 1963. "Addie was tying her sash. Then it happened." A savage explosion of 19 sticks of dynamite stashed under a stairwell ripped through the northeast corner of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. "I couldn't see anymore because my eyes were full of glass - 23 pieces of glass," says Cox. "I didn't know what happened. I just remember calling, 'Addie, Addie.' But there was no answer. I don't remember any pain. I just remember wanting Addie."



That afternoon, while Cox's parents comforted her at the hospital, her older sister Junie, 16, who had survived the bombing unscathed, was taken to the University Hospital morgue to help identify a body. "I looked at the face, and I couldn't tell who it was," she says of the crumpled form she viewed. "Then I saw this little brown shoe - you know, like a loafer - and I recognized it right away."

Addie Mae Collins was one of four girls killed in the blast. Denise McNair; Carole Robertson, 14; and Cynthia Wesley, 14, also died, and another 22 adults and children were injured. Meant to slow the growing civil rights movement in the South, the racist killings, like the notorious murder of activist Medgar Evers in Mississippi three months earlier, instead fueled protests that helped speed passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

"The bombing was a pivotal turning point," says Chris Hamlin, the current pastor of the Sixteenth Street church, whose modest basement memorial to the girls receives 80,000 visitors annually. Birmingham - so rocked by violence in the years leading up to the blast that it became known as Bombingham - "Finally," adds Hamlin, "began to say to itself, 'This is enough!'"

The Justice Department is saying it too. Last month it announced it had [reopened the probe into the bombing](#), delivering the statement a day after the theatrical release of [4 Little Girls](#), a Spike Lee documentary about the attack that will play in 10 cities before airing on HBO in February.

[Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss](#), a truck driver and longtime Ku Klux Klan member, was convicted of the murders in 1977. Though the FBI always believed he had accomplices, even identifying three suspects, the case against them was marred by conflicting accounts, and Chambliss, who died in prison at age 81 in 1985, refused to the end to cooperate. But new leads that emerged a year ago have made the FBI cautiously hopeful. "You have an old case, and we don't want to raise expectations too high," says Craig Dahle, an FBI spokesman in Birmingham, "but we would not have reopened the case if we did not believe there was a possibility of

solving it."

Still, the community holds some hope for final justice (the case was reopened in 1980 and 1988 without arrests) for the young martyrs. Denise McNair, the daughter of photo shop owner Chris and schoolteacher Maxine, was an inquisitive girl who never understood why she couldn't get a sandwich at the same counter as white children. Carole Robertson, whose father was a band master at an elementary school and whose mother was a librarian, was an avid reader, dancer and clarinet player. Cynthia Wesley, whose parents were also teachers, left the house that day having been admonished by her mother to adjust her slip to be presentable in church.

Addie's family was the poorest of the four. She was one of seven children born to Oscar Collins, a janitor, and Alice, a homemaker. "It was clear that she lacked things," recalls Rev. John Cross, the pastor of the church at the time of the bombing. "But she was a quiet, sweet girl." And, Sarah adds, a budding artist: "She could draw people real good."

It is no surprise that Sarah and her sister Junie have never fully shaken off the horror of that day 34 years ago. "I never smiled, and I never talked about what had happened," says Junie. "Then, back in 1985, someone told me that it was going to destroy me if I didn't start talking about it. So I did. I ended up checking into Brookwood (Medical Center, for psychotherapy) for 37 days."

Junie, like Sarah, now works as a housekeeper. Her employer, plastic surgeon Dr. Peter Bunting, had no notion of her connection to the bombing when he hired her. "I almost fell off my stool when she told me," he says, adding that while Junie holds no grudge, "I think she will always be in a state of healing - which is true of the city too." Junie lives in a spacious one-story home and is a member of a small church congregation called Fellowship West.

"She is queen," says Christopher Williams, "always so positive and outgoing that it's hard for me to imagine the timid, nervous person she says she was for so many years. She told me that she thinks she's finally crossed the bridge from the bombing, and I said, "Maybe you are the bridge."

After the blast, Sarah's face was so drenched in blood, says Cross, that "when they asked me who she was, I had to say I had no idea." In the hospital, Sarah, whose eyes were bandaged, wondered why Addie didn't visit with the rest of the family. Her sister Janie told her that "Addie's back is hurting." Sarah learned of Addie's death when she overheard Janie talking to a nurse. "It hurt real bad," Sarah says. "I just didn't know what I would do without Addie." Sarah spent three months in the hospital, ultimately losing her right eye (she now suffers from glaucoma in her left).

She worked as a short-order cook after high school and was married for three years to a city worker before she took a foundry job, which she held for 16 years. In 1988, she married Leroy Cox, a mechanic, and the two live together in a small, cheerful prefab house; a statue of the Virgin Mary graces its tiny front yard. Sarah's family members say she has always been the peacemaker, even as she struggled to find peace for herself. "In 1989," Sarah recalls, "a prophet called out to me at church and prayed for me to be relieved of my nervousness and fear. It has been better since then. The panic attacks in the middle of the night finally subsided."

What most concerns Sarah and Junie now is the [forlorn state of Addie's grave site](#) in a cemetery so close to the Birmingham airport that the roar of jets seem to mock the mourners below. The grass is overgrown, and a dirt road leading there is rutted, but Junie and Sarah can't afford to move their sister. "It is," says Junie, standing over the grave at dusk on a hot Alabama evening, "like an open sore to us."